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Conference Abstract

Transforming Closed Silos into Shared Resources: Opening up data on historical collection agents affiliated with the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin

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Abstract

Many natural science collections (NSCs) and museums keep information about collectors and other collection agents affiliated with their specimens and respective institution in internal catalogues, databases or wikis. Despite the fact that people data are crucial for linking collection objects, expeditions, publications, archival material, correspondence, etc. (Page 2016, Groom et al. 2020), such data are often only available internally, with limited or no access for external users.

In the past, collectors have often been active in multiple fields, gathering e.g., zoological and botanical as well as ethnological or anthropological objects. This transdisciplinary collecting practice, in addition to the tradition of exchanging duplicates between institutions, results in a large overlap of people affiliated with different collections. Opening up available data will improve data quality in collection databases, support the disambiguation of collection agents (Dillen et al. 2021) and allow cross-disciplinary reuse of the data.

Within a pilot study conducted at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin (MfN), the information kept in an internal “MfN collector wiki” is made available via Wikidata. Wikidata is a free and open knowledge base that is collaborative and multilingual, and can be edited by anyone in the world. Wikidata stores structured data that are both human and machine readable, and it serves as a hub/broker for other identifiers (Vrandečić and Krötzsch 2014).

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An innovative open participatory approach is taken using edit-a-thons, involving

1. MfN staff (collection manager, scientific heads of collections, scientists, etc.) to add and update information 'passively' available within the institution, and
2. the wider public, e.g., citizen scientists and other interested parties.

Wikidata items are newly created or updated and enriched with additional information, also linking to collections, archives, and libraries.

In this talk we will present the method and preliminary results of our study. One focus will be 'hidden champions' such as women scientists and local collectors, to make their contribution to global natural heritage visible. Another focus will be on collections from the era of European colonial expansion until the beginning of the 20th century, especially the former German colony, Cameroon.

The number of institutions openly sharing data is increasing. However, following the TDWG 2022 conference motto "Stronger together", we call for others to join in sharing data using persistent (people) identifiers and standards.

Keywords

collector, colonial history, edit-a-thons, knowledge graph, Linked Open Data (LOD), natural science collections (NSCs), people data, Persistent Identifier (PIDs), Wikidata

Presenting author

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